

focus

Vocational training

Vocational colleges in the USA and Canada have a lot to offer international students, reveals **BETHAN NORRIS**.

Vocational and technical training, when students receive a combination of both academic and job-oriented training in a field of their choice, is a significant education sector in both the USA and Canada, yet is often overlooked by the international student market in the scramble for university places. However, as vocational colleges realise the student market potential beyond their shores, more overseas students are being recruited into this sector to further their career goals.

Soo Kim from Xincon Technology School in New York, USA, explains that their courses appeal directly to the overseas student market because they offer a flexible range of ESL programmes alongside. "For international students, studying English is the first step to pursuing their career goals, no matter which field they are in," she says "[We offer] ESL plus, with which students can take additional practical skills courses in digital fashion design [or] our nursing programme."

Kim says that increasing international interest in their courses has largely mirrored demand in the current job market for "computer skills, language ability and medical knowledge". In relation to their popular nursing programme for foreign students, she claims, "Healthcare is one of the fastest growing professions throughout the world. The shortage of nursing is causing a dramatic increase in salaries for nurses."

At the Art Institute of Vancouver in Vancouver, BC in Canada, Christiaan Bernard agrees that the dynamic job market influences students to enrol on their courses. "There is a shift in the world where many employers want people who can actually do the work," he says. "Not someone who they will have to provide thousands of dollars of further training to, which might still end with the person being unable to do the work." Bernard estimates that 50 per cent of their international students eventually go on to work in Canada after completing vocational courses at the school.

Many colleges offer vocational courses geared towards very specific industries and some cover a wide

range of business sectors. In Lakewood, WA in the USA, Franclyn Heinecke at Clover Park Technical College relates, "[We] offer [courses in] cyber security, networking and several other computer programmes, pilot training and aircraft mechanics along with many other mechanics programmes, interior design, aesthetician training with full spa services and training in nearly 50 other careers as well."

However, other vocational colleges, such as the Art Institute of Vancouver, concentrate on providing state-of-the-art training for a narrower career field. This college offers courses in media arts, design, fashion, performing arts and culinary arts and Bernard adds, "We are one of the top five schools in North America for recording arts and sound engineering [as well as] game art design."

While vocational colleges can provide a direct pathway into a very specialised career in a relatively short period of time – most vocational qualifications take considerably less time than the three or four years needed for an undergraduate degree – they can also be used as a shortcut into further academic study. Suzanne Woods from Fleming College in Peterborough, ONT, Canada, says that articulation agreements between their college and other universities are a major draw for students overseas. "It can be difficult [for foreign students] to enter into a university directly owing to the large number of applicants," she says. "Consequently, many students will use the college system as a stepping stone on their way to a university education."

However, the most important role that vocational colleges play is in their continuing development of specialised training. As Woods explains, "Many students are drawn by some of the very unique programmes that we offer, such as sustainable building and design, artist blacksmithing, geographic information systems, and adventure and eco-tourism. These types of programmes are not only difficult to find at the university level in Canada – they can be very difficult to find internationally too."